Quality Culture and Best Practices in 'Teaching, Learning and Evaluation'

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Aristotle once described quality as 'a habit.' William A. Foster's observation that 'Quality is never an accident' supplements the truth contained in Aristotle's words. Although in the field of Higher Education there is no Quality Control Bureau but the corporate term *Quality* has of late become a buzz word in the academic circle. It is just impossible today to remain silent on the question of quality. But how to define 'quality' and what does one mean by 'quality culture'? Generally speaking, quality is an attribute that points to the superiority of an object or a task and makes it worth preserving or worth emulating. Quality in this sense is the highest point in the graded scale of superiority which ranges from Good through Great to Grand. A task is 'good' when it deserves appreciation for being well executed; 'great' when it elicits admiration for the flawlessness of its execution; and it is 'grand' or 'sublime' when it commands respect for being surpassingly excellent. Quality, strictly speaking, should go with this third exalted state. If any institution excels anywhere in a way that others cannot help imitating that method or principle, quality has certainly been achieved there. Etymologically the word 'culture', derived from Latin *colere*, carries the meaning of husbandry or tending of natural growth. Although the metaphorical sense of mental or attitudinal refinement through touch of fine arts is most current today, the original sense of tilling and rearing is still retained in certain compounds like *pisciculture* and *tissue-culture*. So, in Higher Education the expression 'Quality Culture' signifies cultivation and nurturing of habits which define the quality of service an institution is catering to its stakeholders. Admittedly, this entails both identification of quality segments and consciously pursuing them so that other institutions also find these worth imitating.

Best practices in Higher Education are innovative practices of an educational institution, which are rated as a sort of Quality Quotient and may be used as reliable benchmarks of quality. Such practices are always encouraged and highlighted by NAAC so that the whole academic community could be sensitized to these imitable practices. There is no copyright or patent of best practices, for no institution is expected to have any monopoly over quality. Rather these are to be shared with sister institutions so that through imitation and emulation they too may succeed in upgrading themselves and march ahead. Incidentally, in English the superlative is normally followed by a noun in the singular. However, in the phrase 'Best Practices', the noun is in the plural presumably because there is no such thing as an ideally best practice. Or, to put it differently, the expression suggests the possibility of having quite a number practices that deserve the 'best' designation.

Of the seven criteria of assessment preferred by NAAC, 'Teaching, Learning and Evaluation' is most important. This is not only because it carries nearly half the weightage but because what a school, college or university is doing in this field finally determines its Grade or Rank in any appraisal report. The infrastructure of a college may be inadequate but it may have a galaxy of dedicated faculty to instruct and inspire the admitted students. Such an institution is always rated by

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stakeholders above the one which has enviable infrastructure but poor faculty.

'Everybody who is incapable of learning has taken to teaching' may be a cynical exaggeration of Oscar Wilde but it indirectly points to the immense value of learning in the life of a teacher. A teacher who has lost the zeal or spirit for learning has become an intellectual fossil and is really no more interesting to a learner than a piece of antic to a child visiting a museum. As regards teaching, paradigm-shifting on the part of the teacher is crucial. Teachers who nostalgically recall the thrilling experience of listening to the spell-casting lecturers of their illustrious teachers, often vote for the lecture method and look upon other more student-friendly or learner-centred methods as mere shirking. But even the most wonderfully articulate teachers must agree with Plutarch that the mind of a learner 'is a fire to be kindled, not a vessel to be filled'. In other words, they should recognize the value of under-teaching, which creates conditions for effective learning on the part of their students. Admittedly, the best practice in teaching consists in consciously downplays the role of imparting a wagonload of information in the class. Thomas Carruthers once described a teacher as "one who makes himself progressively unnecessary." What this means is that the more a learner performs, the greater is the need for the teacher to withdraw himself or herself, leaving the space entirely for the learner. However, this is by no means easier than lecturing on a topic. The teacher must make a lesson plan — devise instruction materials in such a way as to ensure involvement of all categories of students, from the advanced learners to those who often lag behind. This will motivate learners to plough forward and minimize dependence on institutional or private tutors. The best teacher always encourages students to explore their creativity by way of writing Term Papers, participating in Quiz and Group Discussions, preparing Posters on a given topic, looking up dictionaries and encyclopedias for grasping the precise import of words and concepts dropped in the class. All these may be used as supplements to the lecture method of teaching, as OH / PowerPoint presentation may suitably be used as substitutes for chalk & talk method. The best practice in teaching, therefore, would be to inflame the learners' passion for learning and help them at every step of acquisition of knowledge. Indeed, the basic difference between a good teacher and a great teacher is, to borrow the words of William Arthur Ward, "The good teacher explains...The great teacher inspires." A teacher who thus acts as an enthusiastic facilitator in the process of learning is likely to be more successful than the instructor who bores, even frightens, the learner with a Himalayan pile of information.

While teaching is practically the art of dissemination of acquired knowledge, research consists in creation of knowledge. One of the best teaching-learning practices in an institute of Higher Education is to look upon research and teaching as complementary activities. Teaching without research is blind and research without teaching is lame. In other words, minus research it is impossible to widen the frontiers of knowledge; minus teaching it is impossible to hand down the fruits of acquired knowledge to posterity. The best teacher is one who is acclaimed by his students not only for his/her knowledge-base and use of innovative methods of teaching but also for research-mindedness. One healthy practice of an ideal institute of Higher Education is, therefore, engaging teachers in Research Projects. Apart from paucity of fund and time, one disincentive for young researchers is the limitedness of number of platforms for publishing the fruits of their research. This disadvantage can be turned into an advantage if the institution goes for publishing its own journal, without, however,

compromising the standard of a research journal.

Learners are at the center of this complex system of cultivation and dissemination of knowledge. Learning is not just amassing information but critical assimilation of ideas and application of judgment. Learning is a conscious, intellectual activity. Hence even when the teacher delivers the most precious gems of wisdom, learning may not take place if students attending the lecture are passive or lukewarm. Socrates knew this very well, or else why should the great master say, "I cannot teach anybody anything, I can only make them think." Since it is the learners who are to learn, the entire system will collapse if they lose interest. The advanced learner must be inspired to keep abreast of latest developments in the field. Summing up a lecture, writing digests of books, framing questions on a topic just taught, demonstrating charts and illustrations, are 'best'activities, which may create a challenging situation for learners and may thus ensure their intellectual participation in the game. Regular use of Library & Internet is likely to make learning a joyous experience even for the most mediocre learners. It is unwise to blame learners if an otherwise good teacher despite his/her sincere attempts fails to put across his/her ideas in the class. Ignacio Estrada has rightly maintained that "If a child can't learn the way we teach, may be we should teach the way they learn." In other words, instead of expecting learners to adjust their mind to our pedagogic ways, the best approach would be to fine-tune our skills to the learning competence of the students. This will surely minimize communication gap and teaching as well as learning would be a rewarding experience to teachers and students respectively.

Evaluation is a system for judging whether and how far the teaching objective has been achieved. Most often evaluation is tagged to degree and it has nothing to do with to what extent the subject taught in the class has been grasped by the learner. The 'best' practice in evaluation would be to turn it into a tool for motivation. Here what is most desirable is to remove the shade of stigma associated with failure. All of those who qualify in a test think that they have learnt fully what was there for learning, as those who get plucked feel that the entire time spent over learning is wasted. But, in reality, failure does not show one's inability to learn. Rather it is indicative of to what extent the subject taught has been mastered. Once we understand this, far from blaming a learner for poor performance, we would rather treat his/her marksheet as a true progress report and devise means of assisting him/her in regaining confidence so that the learner may succeed in putting up a better show at the next round. Periodic assessment of the progress of learners and the access of the learners to the checked scripts may prevent evaluation from getting degraded into a farcical system of awarding grades. The marks of class tests are to be positively linked to final results so that careless students reading selectively get no chance of coming out with flying colours and every learner feels compelled to take these tests with due seriousness. Taking regular and systematic feedback on the performance of teachers is the most praiseworthy practice in evaluation. It ensures accountability, generates competitiveness among teachers and gives them a scope to improve their performance by curing the weaknesses diagnosed

Examples are always better than precepts. Let me, therefore, round off the discussion citing some instances of quality culture in the form 'best' practices institutionalized by different centres of Higher Education of our country. If any institution consciously tries to model its activities on these 'best' practices, it is likely to cater better service to its stakeholders as well as to society.

1983), fitness of educational outcome and experience for use (Juran and Gryna, 1988), conformance of education output to planned goals, specifications and requirements (Crosby, 1979), defect avoidance in education process (Grosby, 1979) and meeting or exceeding customer's expectation of education (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985). It may be suggested that total quality management may be a more feminine style of leading, teachers and total quality management. Men attribute their use of power and direct styles to total quality management, where as women attribute their use of relational styles to total quality managements.

In all fields, especially education has an important matter. Total quality Management as a necessary element always has a direct influence on the human improvement. It can also led to high commitment and spirit in work environment. Teachers should be encouraged towards positive aspect of Total Quality Management and to take active participation to render quality education. Leaders are essential in creating in creating a quality culture and they play a significant role in assuring that the necessary resources are available to support quality initiatives. When the quality principles will be implemented holistically, a culture for academic excellence will be created (Robert *et al.*, 1991).

"Do your allotted work, for such work is better than no work all. Even the preservation of your body would be impossible with out some activity" (The Holy Gita' III – 8).

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